

H.E. Vincent Obsitnik, New U. S. Ambassador to Slovakia



H.E. Vincent Obsitnik
Ambassador

Embassy of the United States of America
in the Slovak Republic

As mentioned in the introduction, you have acquired a rich experience in the business sphere. In what ways would you like to apply the lessons from the business world in your diplomatic career?

I love my country – the United States – and I serve it very gladly. I have already done that when I was younger. After I graduated from the Naval Academy, I spent five years in the Navy. After becoming a civilian again, I had very successful careers with IBM, Unisys and Litton. Serving our country is, for me, very special and I very much appreciate the opportunity to do it again as US Ambassador.

Therefore, I want to help with my all my past experience from encouraging entrepreneurial innovation, managing human resources, public relations, and leading discussions. I also experienced the best of American ingenuity in high technology, and I hope my experience will be helpful as Slovakia seeks to raise the level of its economy and the quality of its human resources.

Everything one learns in entrepreneurship can be useful in diplomacy. Reaching out to people is a necessary quality whether in the business or diplomatic world.

AmCham Slovakia would like to extend a warm and hearty welcome to the new Ambassador of the United States of America to Slovakia, H.E. Vincent Obsitnik. Ambassador Obsitnik comes to Slovakia with many years of experience in the business world and has had corporate executive careers with the IBM, Unisys and Litton Corporations. We look forward to intense mutually beneficial cooperation with Ambassador Obsitnik during his time in Slovakia. We are also pleased that His Excellency provided the AmCham “Connection” magazine with the following interview.

Many people are surprised by your excellent Slovak language. How did you learn it?

We spoke Slovak in my family while I was growing up. It was an eastern dialect, but I've managed to learn literary Slovak over the years that I visited Slovakia. I look forward to improving my Slovak further during my stay in the country.

a NATO ally, to meet Slovakia's international obligations as a member of NATO and the EU, and to contribute to addressing the challenges we both face as members of the international community, especially in places like Afghanistan.

We commend Slovakia on its leadership during the past two years as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, where our two countries worked very closely. We appreciate Slovak support more broadly for international standards of human rights and the encouragement of civil society democracy. Slovakia's image in the U.S. and throughout the world is greatly enhanced by the impressive work of Slovak NGOs training and supporting those seeking to democratize their own countries and sharing their experience of successful political and economic reform.

My top economic and commercial objectives will be to promote American exports, encourage continued strong growth in foreign direct investments, and protect U.S. business interests in the country.

Can you briefly evaluate the economic potential of Slovakia?

The last five years have brought remarkable economic changes in Slovakia, and I see no reason why Slovakia can't continue along this path. Slovakia's favorable economic environment and skilled and flexible workforce have been the key factors behind the inflow of FDI and corresponding economic growth in recent years.

How would you assess the current U.S. – Slovak relations?

The U.S. has deep and long-running ties with the Slovak people. The foundation for this relationship is based on the numerous familial and historic connections between the two countries, which I know well from my own upbringing and years of visiting my friends and relatives in this country. I will seek to enhance these ties by facilitating additional people-to-people and institution-to-institution contacts between our two countries. At the official level, Slovakia is seen as a partner and an ally. We look to the government to maintain strong relations as

The country is ideally located to serve the rest of the EU as well as markets to the east, and will have a distinct advantage over its neighbors as an investment location if it stays on track to adopt the Euro next year. Although the country is best known for the automotive industry, it has increasingly become a hub for shared service operations, which is often a stepping stone for attracting higher value-added industries.



What do you consider to be the major challenges of Slovakia's future economic development?

I see three major challenges that Slovakia must meet if it is to continue its economic development. First, it is important to maintain the positive business environment that underpins the recent strong GDP growth. AmCham is playing an important role in this process through proactive advocacy on issues that affect foreign investors, whether it is changes to the labor code or newly proposed reforms to the health and education sectors. The American Embassy will continue to support the preservation of a welcoming environment for investment.

Second, the benefits of this growth should be shared by all groups throughout the country. To help facilitate new investments, the government needs to quickly develop the necessary infrastructure, including completing the east/west highway to connect the less developed eastern part of this country with the rest of the EU.

Finally, Slovakia must reform secondary and university education so that students will have the necessary technological, managerial, and entrepreneurial skills that companies are increasingly demanding. As the unemployment rate continues to decline, it is also important to target the long-term unemployed to ensure that they have the skills to become productive members of the workforce and share in Slovakia's prosperity.

What are the main goals of the U.S. Embassy under your leadership?

My top economic and commercial objectives will be to promote American exports, encourage continued strong growth in foreign direct investments, and protect U.S. business interests in the country. To address the concerns outlined in the previous question, we will work with the government to protect the business environment, seek to expand the already strong U.S. business presence in the east of the country, and promote successful models of public/private partnerships in the education sector.

Our embassy will work closely with the Slovak government to help prepare Slovakia to join the Visa Waiver Program, simplifying the process under which Slovak citizens can travel to the U.S. for both personal and business reasons.

On the foreign policy and security fronts, we are working closely with Slovakia in NATO to promote

stability in Afghanistan and, in the short term, seeking resolution of Kosovo's status. The U.S. also supports efforts by the Slovak Government, as well as Slovak non-governmental organizations, to encourage the further integration of the Balkans and Ukraine into Europe and to share Slovakia's unique experience as a successful post-Communist democracy with countries in transition -- from Belarus to Cuba.

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Where do you see the biggest scope for U.S. Embassy cooperation with AmCham Slovakia?

Let me say from the outset that the Embassy already has an excellent relationship with AmCham, so my primary goal is to build on this close level of cooperation for the benefit of the foreign investment community. We will continue to cooperate on advocacy efforts to ensure that foreign investors have a voice on issues that affect the business environment.

We will look to partner on projects in the education sector to promote the U.S. model of public private partnerships. I hope to also work closely with the AmCham office in Kosice to increase the Embassy's presence in eastern Slovakia.

We are proud of the fact that the American companies invested in Slovakia are also great citizens of Slovakia. I commend their good works outside the business field, too. They are truly committed to Slovakia's future as well as their own.

Veronika Slováková, AmCham Staff

BIOGRAPHY

Vincent Obsitnik was sworn-in as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the United States of America to the Slovak Republic on November 9, 2007. Prior to his current appointment, Ambassador Obsitnik was appointed in 2006 by President George W. Bush to the U.S. Presidential Delegation to the Commemoration of the 65th Anniversary of the Tragedy in Babyn Yar in Ukraine. In 2005, he was appointed by President George W. Bush to the U.S. Presidential Delegation for the Austrian State Treaty Anniversary. In October 2001, he was appointed by President George W. Bush to the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad and served as a member of the Commission until July 2006. The purpose of the Commission is to be concerned about the cultural heritage of Americans from Central and Eastern Europe. Ambassador Obsitnik worked to bring international attention to the plight of the 17th and 18th century Greek Catholic wooden churches of Slovakia and, through his leadership, two of the most endangered churches have been restored.

Ambassador Obsitnik has had corporate executive careers with the IBM, Unisys and Litton Corporations. At Unisys Corporation, as President of the Systems Development Division, he led a \$600 million business with 3000 employees marketing and developing advanced electronic and computing systems. At Litton Corporation, he was Vice President, International and directed business expansion into the European and Latin American markets. In 27 years at the IBM Corporation, his responsibilities spanned the areas of Marketing, Sales, Manufacturing, Engineering and Program Management. He spent 8 years with the IBM World Trade Corporation with manufacturing responsibilities in Europe, Latin America and Asia. In Latin America, he had overall responsibility for the management of manufacturing plants in Brazil, Argentina and Mexico. In Asia, he was responsible for manufacturing logistics of all IBM operations. Following these careers, Ambassador Obsitnik started and became President of International Investments Inc., a consulting company, working in the areas of joint ventures, technology licensing and privatization projects between the U.S. and Central Europe.

Born in 1938 in Moravany, Slovakia, he immigrated with his parents that same year, prior to the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Nazi Germany. His father worked as a coal miner in Pennsylvania after which the family moved to New Jersey where he grew up. Upon graduating from Linden High School, in Linden, NJ, he received an appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy and graduated with the Class of 1959. He then served the next five years as an officer in the U.S. Navy, in destroyers and submarines.

Ambassador Obsitnik graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1959 with honors. He received his MBA in Finance from The American University in Washington, DC. He has also attended the IBM Advanced Management School, Sands Point, Long Island, NY; the IBM International Management School in La Hulpe, Belgium; and the Unisys Executive Program at The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.

Ambassador Obsitnik is fluent in the Slovak language and has an understanding of Russian. He is a marathon runner and plays tennis and squash. He is married to the former Annemarie Harden. They have four sons and twelve grandchildren.